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SPEECH

OF

MR. WOOD, OF NEW YORK,

ON THE

OREGON QUESTION.

DELIVERED

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

JANUARY 31, 1846.

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SPEECH.

n the resolution giving the twelve months' notice for the termination of the joint occupancy of the Oregon territory.

Mr. WOOD addressed the committee in sub-
ance, as follows:

He believed, he said, that all were now con-
nced that this House was divided into three
stinct divisions. First, those opposed to giving
e notice; next, those in favor of it, and yet
ere for negotiation; and, lastly, those who
ere in favor of the notice, and yet insisted on the
hole of Oregon to 54 deg. 40 min.—a policy
hich, if carried out, would inevitably lead to war.
s one of the representatives of a State, which, in
ich an event, would have to do no small share of
e fighting, and, what was of still more conse-
ience, no small share of the paying, he felt obliged
offer some remarks on this subject. He would
ot boast of the courage of his State, for fear it
ight be doubted. She was wise enough, he trust-
l, "not to seek the fight," and gallant enough "not
) shun it when it came." She would pay all just
emands upon her, whether in gold or iron. Thus
uch of vaunting the common sense of the House
vould excuse, but he could not have asked such an
ndulgence had he gone any farther than this. Had
ie joined in the wild war-cry which had rung
hrough this House, carrying us back to the dark
ges, or, at least, to that time when some fiery Percy,
r hot Douglass, marshalled their retainers, not then,
s now, for a foray on the ballot-box, or at most on
he treasury, but on border lands; had he literally
leified the tiger attributes of his species, invoked
war, the scourge and curse of nations, as a blessing
ipon his country, or exalted mere brute courage
)ver all that was intellectual and moral in man, as
iad been done on this floor, he would not only have
ipologized to this House, but to Christendom, for so
gross an attack upon the civilization of the age.

He admired the moral courage of the gentleman
rom South Carolina, [Mr. RHETT,] who was the
irst on this floor to rebuke this spirit, and to strip
war of its tinsel, and show it as it was, a naked, re-
volting skeleton. He, for one, thought not the less
of his bravery, for his morality. Talk to novel-
reading girls and beardless boys of the glories and
laurels of war, but not to men of sense. Why,
sir, said he, when I, the son of a revolutionary sol-
dier, heard the revolutionary war alluded to in con-
nexion with the one here invoked, I felt that it was
almost sacrilege to name them in the same breath; it
was virtually confounding the patriot and the brig-
and.

Gentlemen, he said, had talked as if the only rea-
sons for opposition to a war for Oregon were found-
ed in fears of England. Were there not sufficient
reasons to deprecate a war, other than our fears?
Grant, if you choose, for the sake of the argument,
that England should be worsted in every conflict,
and that your plans for conquest and victory, like
Captain Bobadil's, were perfectly feasible, it would
still be dear-bought victory. You would have in-
flicted greater evils on your own country than on
your enemy's. You will have demoralized your
country, centralized its government, swept away its
democracy, and erected on its ruins a military aris-
tocracy, and thrown back for years the civilization
of mankind. Nor would this be all. You will have
arrested the progress of liberal opinions throughout
the world, and especially in that very country where
the principles of free-trade, (the best of all peace so-
cieties,) are spreading rapidly, widely, and triumph-
antly, benefiting alike that country and this, and
and which can be arrested only by a war between
the two nations.

Gentlemen were very much inclined to denounce
England; but the England of 1775 or 1812 was not
the England of 1846. Paradoxical as it might
seem, the only effectual way to attack England was
by peace, and not by war. It was the only way
you could reach her proud unfeeling aristocracy,
who had been built up by war, and whom a con-
tinuance of peace would ere long put down. With
that aristocracy, none of us had any sympathy; but
he trusted all had with a down-trodden people,
struggling to unclasp their grasp, and who had been
demoralized, plundered, beggared, and reduced to
starvation by glorious war. And if the same state
of things, and by the same means, was not produced
in this country, it would not be the fault of some of
the gentlemen who had addressed the committee;
and where a population might ere long be found
sufficiently degraded to hire themselves for a shil-
ling a day, as in England, to the trade of wholesale
murder. Why was this deadly hate manifested
against England? Say what you wou'd, with all
her injustice to Ireland, and to a portion of her own
citizens, she still had more of civil and religious lib-
erty than any other country in Europe. There
the liberty of speech and of the press were inviolate,
and the blush came sometimes tingling to his own
cheek when it occurred to him that in this respect
it was more inviolable in England than in some
portions of his own country. Nor could he forget
that the first aspirations for civil and religious liber-
ty that ever dawned on this world arose in England
—the same spirit that sent forth the pilgrims of New

England, inspired Hampden, Milton, and Vane, and brought the first Charles to the block. And now, at this day, among the middle classes of England, and among those whose names are great without titles, were many who were manfully battling the cause of the people and of human progress, and who would deprecate a war with this country as a disgrace to civilization.

The arrogance of the British government, of which so much had been said, was as little to his taste as the profligacy and insidious tyranny of France, or the despotism of Russia. He conceded that all three were hostile to republican institutions; and it became us to see to it that no unjust act of ours should furnish them a pretext for an increased hostility. We were told, too, of the rapacity of England; so also were France and Russia. The one had once laid under contribution the Sandwich islands, had seized on the Society islands, and driven our own citizens from the Gaboon in Africa. The other, after blotting out one nation (Poland) from the map of the world, had, by subsidizing Sweden and Norway, extended her dominions across the eastern continent. On the south, she commanded the Danube and the Euxine, while on our northwest, she was in possession, and by treaty, of some six degrees of this very Spanish title. Who made us the avenger of the wrongs which these nations had inflicted? They bide their time. God had not made us their avenger. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." It was madness and folly to run a tilt against all these powers: And, when he read some of the resolutions offered in connexion with this subject, or listed to declarations made on this floor, and in the other wing of the Capitol, breathing defiance against the nations of the earth, challenging them to the fight, and boasting of the ease with which we could conquer them, he knew of nothing which could equal such conduct, save that of the madman, who, throwing himself on the track of a railroad, challenged a locomotive to fight, roundly asserting that it was nothing but a cook-stove on wheels. He was constrained to believe that, with our Spanish title, we had also acquired no small share of Spanish Quixotism and Spanish gasconade.

The gentleman from South Carolina had alluded to what rumor had said in relation to the introduction of this notice; that it was in fact, a game to make great men greater, and little men great. He would assure the gentleman that New York had no hand in such a game. And if the honorable gentleman would present before the grand inquest of the nation as nuisances all such, and the whole tribe of politicians by trade, he would bid him God speed.

Why, sir, said he, the curse of an unborn posterity will rest on his head who, for his own aggrandisemet, shall unnecessarily plunge this country into a war. Woe to him who attempts it. It had been asserted on that floor that no one could be the next president that had not joined in this war-cry and shouted for the whole of Oregon. He trusted he should never see the day when a mere popular cry, or mere availability, would constitute the qualification of a candidate for the presidency. He had voted for Mr. Polk certainly not because he was in favor of Texas, or had chimed in with any other popular cry, but because he believed him honest and capable, and because he had confidence in his integrity. Much had been said about another game or another compact—the whole of Oregon and the whole of Texas. If a game was playing he had no part in that either. If a compact, he had already shown by his vote in what light he regarded one part of it, at least. And yet it had been suggested that his vote, and of those who like him had voted against the annexation of Texas, or rather against a clause in its constitution, had been influenced by a certain distinguished northern statesman, [Mr. Wright,] and inferences had been drawn therefrom in relation to that gentleman alike unjust and untrue. He knew nothing of that gentleman's opinions either in regard to Texas or Oregon, except what the public knew. He did not represent him or any other individual. He had acted in accordance with the views he had always entertained. It was a matter in which he could know no man; nor would he suffer the opinions of any man to come between him and the convictions of his own conscience. Nor had he voted against the annexation of Texas from any supposed hostility, as had been intimated, to the South. He had acted from no such motive, though he had already seen (and might again see) the peculiar institutions of the South made a *sine qua non* qualification for the presidency, and those same institutions made a subject-matter of instruction to a foreign minister by a distinguished southern statesman then holding a high station in the government. To that gentleman (personally unknown to him) he meant no disrespect. He would give him credit for his every virtue, and for the fact that his position, for the time being at least, was defined. He believed that that gentleman and his friends in this House were sincere in their opposition to this notice. They viewed it as a war measure. In this he differed with them. Did he view it in the same light he should hesitate long before he gave it the sanction of his vote. But he did not so view it. The giving of this notice of itself cannot lead to a war. That depended on subsequent action—upon the carrying out the ultra views in relation to Oregon which had been avowed in that House. The "masterly inactivity," of which so much had been said, by bringing the citizens of the two countries in collision, would sooner or later lead to war. Seizing the whole of Oregon by "masterly activity" would inevitably lead to war; and why the latter course had been called masterly he knew not, unless it was the conduct of masters, and very young masters too. He would not at this stage of the debate discuss the question of title. He would merely lay down a few positions, without recourse to the musty records from which he had derived them, which others could and would, he trusted, examine for themselves. These positions he thought, on examination, would be found correct and true. There were very few who did not believe that Great Britain had a claim of some kind or other to the territory in dispute. Whether her title was derived from the Nootka Sound treaty, from the exploration of Mackenzie and the discovery of Fraser's river, from proximity or contiguity, or from our own concessions, it was immaterial, and he should not now stop to consider. He believed our own title south of 49° was unquestionable; and if the position taken by the gentleman from Indiana [Mr. Owen] was correct, and he thought it was, our title was good to 49° 30'; because it was asserted that Spain had a settlement at the time of the Nootka convention, at that point, and Great Britain had abandoned all claim to any territory south of it. If he had any doubts in this matter, it was as to the fact, whether any *bona fide* settlement ever had been made in the disputed territory until recently, and since the commencement

of this controversy. He believed that we had claims, founded upon exploration and discovery, which, putting the Spanish title out of the question, would carry us up at least to 49°. South of this parallel, Great Britain had claimed no exclusive sovereignty. On the other hand, aside from the Spanish title, and by exploration, and discovery, he had yet to learn that we had any title to the country north of 52°, and east of the straits of Fuca. Mr. Rush had conceded to Great Britain all north of 51°. What then was the question at issue? What is the matter at stake which was to plunge two great nations, the most civilized in the world, into a war? It was a strip of land about two degrees in breadth, on the uninhabited northwest coast, of doubtful value and but little known. Would you, sir, fight or negotiate for this?

Besides, and in addition to all this—and this was with him the greatest difficulty—the government had thrice, with a perfect knowledge of its title and in all sincerity, offered to divide this territory on the line of 49°. This was the line marked out by the treaty of Utrecht, and the line of proximity and contiguity. Would you go to war for what you had three times offered to give away? Would we be justified before God and the world in rashly seeking war on such a quarrel? Gentlemen had talked about the great value of the country north of 49°, and some of them had asserted, he believed, that without the whole, Oregon would not be worth a rush. We knew nothing of the country north of that parallel. All that had been said of its value and beauty were mere draughts on the imagination. Capt. Wilkes had confined his exploration to the south of 49°. All that was valuable to us lay below that line. The most valuable harbors, Puget's sound, Hood's canal, and Admiralty inlet, were all south of 49°. The gentleman from Tennessee, [Mr. JOHNSON,] had said that the territory actually in dispute between the two countries lay beween 46° and 49°. This was new to him, and the first time he had ever heard of it. He had never heard of any one who contemplated a settlement of this difficulty upon any line as a basis farther south than 49°. It had been said that American commercial enterprise could not succeed in Oregon unless the British were driven out. This was a reflection upon the American character he would not permit. For who ever heard of an instance in which Americans placed side by side with the British, or any other nation, could not compete with, and outstrip in any enterprise. All that the Americans wanted was good ports; and with them, and left to themselves, they could rival any nation in commerce without the protection of any powerful incorporated company, or the patronage of the government. The difference between us and them is just the difference between this city and its badly-regulated concerns, and those cities which depend on themselves instead of the government. And here, in passing, he would say that the popularity of the President, great as it was, and deservedly so, was owing to his moderation and wisdom: It rested on his 49°, not on his 54° 40'; and he regretted to see resolutions offered in this House virtually reflecting on his course and his predecessors in this matter, and he had yet to learn whether they were the price of that forgiveness an honorable gentleman had kindly granted him for offering to compromise on the line of 49°.

If this notice should be given, and we should within the year refuse to negotiate, England would then fill Canada and Oregon with troops; the West Indies, Bermuda, and Halifax with her ships-of-war and war-steamers. She would strike no blow, but wait our action; and should we attempt to take the whole of Oregon, or, mistakenly relying on disaffection in Canada, attempt its annexation, we should have war to the knife. Judging from the past, he had too much reliance on the moderation and wisdom of the President to suppose he would take any such course. He believed the administration would negotiate, and settle this question by the law of nations, and not by the law of popular acclamation. He would not so far distrust the good sense of either nation as to suppose that, at a time when their commercial relations were becoming more and more intimate and so beneficial to each other, they would madly, blindly, and foolishly rush on war to adjust a disputed title they never could settle by fighting, but only by negotiation at last; and he would say, that if we went into such a war, we should soon learn the difference between defending our own country and carrying on an aggressive war against another. But, sir, said he, while things were in their present situation, it struck him that we should do that which at all times it was wise and well to do—finish every fortification, and furnish them with ordnance—1,500 pieces of which were then needed for the purpose—refit the navy, increase your war-steamers, or, at least, provide the materials for a steam-marine.

But the truth was, no one believed in war; public opinion was opposed to it, and so much opposed, that they were not only averse to taking any steps to prepare for it, but he apprehended that with many there was an aversion to making the necessary appropriation for a peace establishment. He was for giving the notice, but not for pushing ulterior measures to such an extreme as to preclude negotiation. The country did not believe that measures would be so pressed, and it did not, therefore, apprehend a war. But should he be mistaken in this, and war should come, it was not impulsive courage alone that could carry us safely through it. The experience of two wars had fully tested the truth of this assertion. It had failed in the war of the revolution, though urged on by the most ardent patriotism; and the great leader in that struggle (Washington) had left on record his opinion of its inefficiency: Was this to be a war of a single campaign, it might do much; but it would be a protracted war—one in which cool endurance was as necessary as mere impulsive courage. This the sufferings, the privations, and the pestilence of a camp would soon break down, however enthusiastic at first. War was now a science; and should it break out between the two countries, it was not to be fought behind cotton bags, or in the forest glade with the rifle, but on another and a different battle-field, amid the crossing of bayonets, the flashing of sabres, the thunder of cannon, and the whizzing of shells and Paixhan shot—or on the ocean wave, man to man, and gun to gun. And sure he was, before three years had come and gone, all, save those who reioted in the licentiousness of the camp, or who battened on the miseries of the human race—who, like vultures, hovered over the battle-field, or, like hyenas, preyed upon the slain—would wish for peace as ardently as did the venerable gentleman from Massachusetts and his coevals previous to the treaty of Ghent, and whose advent would be hailed by both nations as the best gift of Heaven.